

VICTOR LEWIS

FAMILY PORTRAIT



JOHN STUBBLEFIELD

CECIL McBEE

EDUARDO SIMON

DON ALIAS

JUMMA SANTOS

FAMILY PORTRAIT

- 1. Family Portrait**
(Victor Lewis)
Camille Music BMI 8:29
- 2. Lil' Sis**
(Victor Lewis)
Camille Music BMI 9:54
- 3. Relentless Desire**
(Victor Lewis)
Camille Music BMI 6:09
- 4. A Mis Padres**
(Victor Lewis)
Camille Music BMI 6:44
- 5. Tuda Muda**
(Steve Slagle)
Slagle Music BMI 7:45
- 6. Bella Y Cosima**
(Victor Lewis)
Camille Music BMI 6:58
- 7. At A Suggestion From Mr. Peter**
(Victor Lewis)
Camille Music BMI 11:37
- 8. And So On...Forever**
(Victor Lewis)
Camille Music BMI 1:08

Victor Lewis - drums, vocals on *Family Portrait*
and *A Mis Padres*, piano on *And So On...Forever*

John Stubblefield - tenor and soprano sax

Eduardo Simon - piano

Cecil McBee - bass

Don Alias - percussion

Jumma Santos - percussion



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Produced by: Joe Harley

Co-Produced by: Victor Lewis and
Joanne Klein

Recorded by: David Baker at
East Hill Studios, NYC
April 11 and 12, 1992

Assistant Engineer: Ue Nastasi
16-Track Mixes by David Baker at
OceanWay Recording, Hollywood, CA

Mastered by: Bernie Grundman

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Y Cosima recorded via 16 track
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Bobby Watson appears courtesy of
Sony Music, Inc.

Don Alias plays L.P. Instruments

All Vocal Arrangements by: Pamela Watson

Vocals on Family Portrait by: Victor Lewis, Pamela Watson,
Raymond Cruz and Bobby Watson.

Vocals on A Mis Padres by: Victor Lewis and Pamela Watson.

Vocals on Bella Y Cosima by: Pamela Watson, Yvonne Hatchett,
Shani Phillpotts, Raymond Cruz, Michael L. Moses and Melissa A.Thomas

"In memory of Richard and Camille Lewis whose musicianship permeates every note I play. I'd like to give thanks to Joe Harley for 20 years of vision, to Bobby and Pamela Watson for their musicianship and for extending their family to me, to Stacey Michaels for keeping the light burning, to Joanne Klein for service above and beyond the call of duty, to lil' sister Yvette Woods for always believing and a special thanks to Billy Hart. Here's to the next generation, Cosima and Isobella."

-Victor Lewis

I've been fortunate to have known Victor Lewis for some 20 years, beginning in the early '70s when Lewis and I would sit around producer Joe Harley's dorm room at the University of Nebraska delving into albums from Joe Henderson, Miles Davis, the Tony Williams Lifetime and the Jack Dejohnette Complex.

That's why it's been a special pleasure following Lewis on his path from music major at the university in Lincoln and on to New York (with a stop in Minneapolis), and his subsequent success with such greats as Woody Shaw, Stan Getz, Carla Bley, Dexter Gordon and David Sanborn to name just a few. Several of his live appearances loom like musical mountains in my memory: a weekend stint with trumpeter Shaw's poll-winning sextet in the Pioneer Square district of Seattle, a Hollywood Bowl concert before 18,000 with the Getz quartet, his tom-tom imagery with Abdullah Ibrahim's sextet at the Sweet Basil club in Greenwich Village and the night at Lush Life when he sat in with Gil Evans and the orchestra, adding further dimension to Evans' already multi-dimensional ensemble.

But it's with special interest that I've followed Lewis' rise as composer. Fans will recall his majestic "Legend of Cheops" from Shaw's *Rosewood* recording, voted the top jazz album of 1979 by *Downbeat* readers. Shaw's follow up live recording, *Stepping Stones*, included Lewis' bustling "Seventh Avenue," a tune which has also been recorded by David Sanborn and the group Lewis co-leads with saxophonist Bobby Watson dubbed Horizon.

The drummer has contributed several tunes to the Horizon book, including the title tune for it's most recent disc, *Present Tense*.

That's why this album, *Family Portrait*, is a landmark in what is already a brilliant career. Not only is it his first release as a leader (Red Records recorded a mainstream session led by the drummer a few weeks before this date that's still awaiting release at the time of this writing), it's the first to document the formidable skills of Victor Lewis, the composer.

While recognition comes slowly to drummers, even those with Lewis' prodigious talents, it seems doubly difficult for drummers to be recognized as writers. "I was recently awakened to the



fact that most people think that when drummers compose, they have someone else write the stuff out for them," Lewis says. "That they hum into a cassette or something and then let somebody transcribe it. I want people to know that I do my writing at the keyboard just like most other composers."



But Lewis, who studied classical piano for four years as a youngster, isn't above some humming when he's working on a new tune. "Since I'm not exactly McCoy Tyner," he laughs, "I'll typically sing the melody when I write and use the right hand to play the chords on the piano and the left hand to do the bass line."

This use of voice has carried into the compositions themselves, giving the material on the recording a warm, human feel. "I started to get off on the sound of the voice," the drummer explains, "stumbling into different syllables and sounds that would accentuate the mood."

He cites the chorus passages on some of Pharoah Sanders' Impulse! recordings and the work of Leon Thomas for inspiring his use of wordless vocals. "A couple times, I addressed doing lyrics for some of the songs, but found that the words sometimes dominated the mood, coerced it into a certain story line that limited the scope of the tune."

In addition to as many as six voices (including Bobby Watson's on "Family Portrait"), Lewis sings on some of the tunes as well. "Someone I played the tunes for suggested I should sing the melody on "A Mis Padres" since I wrote it. Doing that helped the essence of what I was trying to do."

That essence is apparent in two related themes contained in songs on this album. The first and most obvious is Lewis' dedication to his family, especially his parents, as witnessed by the title tune and "A Mis Padres." My mother and father were both musicians," he explains, "and exposed me to all kinds of music." Lewis, who started playing cello at age five (his instrument of choice, the bass, was simply too large), credits his parents for making him stick with piano lessons and allowing him to switch to drums at age eleven. "When it came time for college, they wanted me to look for a more traditional career. But it was too late. Music was in my blood. I was possessed."

Before recording, Lewis spent time digging up the phrase "to my parents" in several different languages, ranging from Portuguese to Thai. "I wanted each one to have a slightly different syllabic count, he says, "so that it would affect the rhythm of the phase." As the tune moves from its multilingual introductory passage, his spoken dedication in English makes this heart-felt feeling especially clear. "During those early New York years, I didn't exactly keep in contact with them like I should. Now I can only dedicate this to their memory."

"Family Portrait" expands on the underlying sense of love and appreciation shown in "A Mis Padres," reflecting on Lewis' own children in relation to the home environment in which he was brought up. The tune, which he spent some five years pulling together, contrasts intense, active passages with moments of tranquil beauty and affectionate warmth.

"Bella Y Cosmia" was written for the drummer's step daughter Isobella and daughter Cosima. His desire to "have the voices sound like children at play" brings a touching innocence to this optimistic, energy-filled number.

Along the same lines is the delicate melody of "Lil Sis" which Lewis dedicates to his sister Yvette. "She always had faith in me," he says. "When I first went out to New York and my parents were freaking, she kept them cool. To this day she believes in what I'm doing and supports it."

The second theme addressed on this recording, represented by "Relentless Desire", is Lewis' long odyssey from his birthplace in Omaha to his present home in New York, from initiate to master of his craft. Mileposts along the way include a visit by the Miles Davis band with drummer Jack DeJohnette to Omaha in 1969. "It was literally a religious experience," Lewis relates. "I haven't been the same since."

A couple years later, Lewis' combo opened for Herbie Hancock's Mwandishi band at the university in Lincoln. The drummer, already skilled in prying open even the most familiar standards with persistent cymbal attacks and rifling snare play over the bridges, blew the house away. More important was the fact that "for once I was getting bona fide feedback. The guys in the group, especially (bassist) Buster Williams and (drummer) Billy Hart, were very encouraging. I was high just hanging out with them for the day. I was ready to quit school that night."



Later, he saw the Hancock band again, this time in Los Angeles at Howard Rumsey's beachside venue, Concerts By the Sea. Saxophonist Bennie Maupin suggested that the young drummer make his move to New York. "I was freaked by the idea," Lewis recalls. "I didn't think I could cut it there. I didn't feel I was ready. But Bennie said 'just go with the attitude that you're going to learn.'" That lightened it up for me, made it seem like a real possibility without the pressure of having to succeed right away." So, on September 16, 1974 – he remembers the date as well – Lewis took the big step. And despite his reservations (he's always borne a surplus of modesty) he began to succeed beyond his wildest expectations.

But not beyond the expectations of those of us who've followed him over the years. Lewis' inventive percussion work is the sort that stimulates his bandmates as well as the listener and there's plenty evidence of that here. Check out his lustrous cymbal work on former Carla Bley ensemble partner Steve Slagel's "Tuda Muda" (All Moods), the only non-Lewis composition on the recording. The drummer's drive and ability to impart character is apparent on "At A Suggestion of Mr. Peters," where his ability to mold rhythms into personal, sometimes impressionistic statements makes this potboiler bubble with insight. And, as a measure of his musical versatility, that's Lewis at the keyboard on "And So On...Forever."

The caliber of musicians who join Lewis on this date reflects not only his well-regarded status but his willingness to employ fresh, young talent, artists who are on relentless pursuits of their own. Saxophonist John Stubblefield, who's called on Lewis for his own record dates, wields a fiery tenor and a softer more

introspective soprano which is especially wise on "Tuda Muda." "Stub always piques the essence of all my tunes," says his drummer-friend. "He's not just mechanically perfect, but can transcend the intellect to get the kind of emotional feeling I'm trying to represent."

Like Lewis, bassist Cecil McBee is among the select group of New York's first-call rhythm section players. Among his long list of credits, which includes such names as Charles Lloyd,

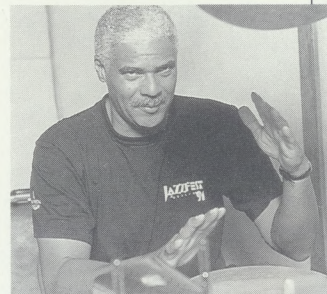


Pharoah Sanders, McCoy Tyner and Chico Freeman, is his sterling performance on pianist Larry Willis' recent AudioQuest recording *Steal Away*.

Percussionist Don Alias, probably best known for a stint with Miles Davis, is an old friend of Lewis'. "We have a sort of hook-up," says the drummer, "and can develop this unspoken feel for the time together. I attribute most of the groove here to him." Jumma Santos, who had an important, though unattributed role in Davis' *Bitches Brew* sessions, rounds out this percussive-rich section.

On the new faces side of the ledger is Venezuelan native Ed Simon, the current pianist in the Horizon band. "Bobby Watson discovered him in Philadelphia," Lewis relates. "Ed's a very wise, very mature player for someone still in his 20s. He may be young, but he has a very old soul."

Drummers often work in the shadows, usually delegate to the end of the band members list on albums or given perfunctory notice in the last line of reviews. That's why it was encouraging to see Lewis receiving some well-deserved recognition this year when he was featured in a *Newsweek* article on the so-called lost, middle generation of jazz artists. But Lewis, like Bobby Watson, Cecil McBee and a host of other musicians, who didn't attract the attention of the major record labels because they were too young to be marketed as icons and too old to be sold as the next hot name to the youth-worshipping masses (unlike, say, Harry Connick Jr. and the Marsalis brothers) has always been visible to those who looked just beneath the glossy, commercial surface. Now, with *Family Portrait*, Victor Lewis, both as drummer and composer, comes solidly into view.



Bill Kohlhaase
*Contributing jazz writer -
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